Fortunes of War, Gerald Moore

'… pro foro mori'

> In the industrial era, our sensory apparatus has been beaten down by marketing, and is as such what is at stake in a veritable war, in which the arms are technologies and the victims are individual and collective ('cultural') singularities, to the extent that there develops an immense symbolic misery.
>
> Bernard Stiegler[1]

Speaking, in 2013, to the Occupy Wall Street protesters in New York's Zuccotti Park, the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek now infamously remarked that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. The truth of the claim is born out in the disenchanting demigods of commerce that we encounter from the beginning to the end of Practice Von Stroheim's *Life-Day (Fortunes of War)*. It is not new to observe that capitalism has long relied upon war for the creation of the markets that keep it in business. Anarchists from Kropotkin to Graeber make much the same point as is made by supermarket shelves overflowing with detergent.[2] What better time to sell Cyclon than when bodies and souls are stained with blood? But much less has been said about how advertising, understood as a permanent instrument for the ongoing subjugation of captured minds, comes to function as a barometer of normality, an anchor point that holds society together beyond the brink of its collapse. This collection is remarkable in its capture of the persistence of advertisements, their lingering trace amidst apocalypse disturbing and reassuring in equal measure.

In the opening scene, a near-empty square filled largely with cars and shadows is transformed into an exhibition space that elevates its contents into art. An elderly man stands before a deodorant model, whose cocked neck, tilted in arousal, and carefree blowing in the wind are offset by an air of melancholy. Eyes shut in disavowal, her vampiric lips graffitied with the blood of her victims, she pouts at the hunched and indifferent John. He'll probably have her anyway. Who wouldn't, nowadays? And as he joylessly consumes, more out of obligation than desire, she lies back and tries to think of the money. From here we proceed, past the alcohol-fuelled promise of wasps transformed into helicopters—nature as a fantasy of war, priming its visibly receptive audience for survival of the fittest—, to the closing image of a man prostrate before the heavens. When not delivered as an injunction to enjoy, today's sacred takes the form of cheap laminate, overlain on a locked door that opens only onto a darkened transit container. Surface is everything.

Somewhere in the midst of all this—juxtaposed with a dubiously self-entwined corpse, slumped across an institutional bed—, the waxwork of a dead soldier is encased in the frothy ejaculate of Pepsi, his hands blown clean off by an explosion of masturbation; his eyes reddened in what hints at hard-earned bliss. The key to the image is to be found in the messy pile of conspicuously branded, spent prophylactics that reduce to a mere detail the bloody baby Xenomorph

erupting from his chest. That eruption, incidentally, is probably just the effect of high fructose corn syrup charging through his plasticised veins, the real coloniser less the Alien than diabetes and the internalised marketing by which it is occasioned. The image is a study in what Beatriz Preciado terms 'pharmacopornography': the production of 'narcosexual affects', the hard-selling of semi-permanent states of intoxication and orgasm that now functions as the basis of contemporary economic activity.[3] The logic at work in this relentless prescription of enjoyment is one of *psycho*power, the war for 'available brain time' waged by advertisers against the libido—an energy source that, alongside labour and nature, constitutes the third great object of capitalist exploitation.[4] Advertising campaigns dictate our experience, battering the senses into submission by saturation bombing with heightened stimuli. The pyrotechnical spectacle provides distraction for a covert operation to hijack the prefrontal cortex via the dopamine system, dulling our capacity to withstand the neurons that fire in response to temptation.

When we are programmed to fall in love on Impulse and collapse in ecstasy before a vision of Diet Coke, is it surprising that the demands made on desire—and our failure to meet them—leave us cognitively off kilter, affectively overwhelmed? This is the war fatigue of consumerist society, or what Bernard Stiegler calls 'symbolic misery', the manufactured malaise that leaves us depressed and demotivated—and which can also be seen to feed into another kind of warfare. The acting out of the dispossessed and disillusioned is less about 'fundamentalism' than desperately looking for a reason to live, a sacred 'feeling of being alive' that those who have lost all sense might just find in the act of blowing stuff up.

Here, though, it is the tinsel lady, the department-store Zarathustra, who best encapsulates the ideology of having fun. Her cheap bauble accessories assert a façade of festivity somewhat at odds with a face that radiates both wryness and exhaustion. The image serves up a visual echo of the 'Keep spending!' uttered by the lesser Bush in the wake of 9/11, and in so doing reveals the awkward, underlying truth of every single variation on that tired old meme: keep calm and carry on feeding the beast that consumes you. As if every lurid Christmas will stick one to the terrorists, she projects to the world (or at least, to the rest of the homeware floor and, above all, to herself): *these celebrations will continue!* Sustained by the opiate of Shiny New Things, not to mention semi-nude 'morale boosters', this kind of defiance is submission masquerading as resistance. The 'old Lie' that 'dulce et decorum est pro patria mori' has given way to the flattened out truth of an age without limits: it is really the markets for which we fight and to which we are sacrificed. The *dulcitas* is purely manufactured, as are the dreams of suitably minor transgression that long ago put paid to any lingering decorousness.

Gilles Deleuze once wrote that we routinely 'participate in mechanisms of control that are equal to the harshest of confinements. There is no need for fear or hope, but only to seek out new weapons'—or new 'arms', as the French would have it:[5] a solution indeed for the soldier without hands, as well as for the massed ranks whose distal limbs have been reduced to atrophied stumps for 'liking' and entering pin codes.

[1] Bernard Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery, volume 1: The Hyperindustrial Epoch*, trans Barnaby Norman. (Cambridge: Polity, 2014), p. 2; *De la misère symbolique, 1: L'Époque hyperindustrielle*. (Paris: Galilée, 2004), p. 14. (Translation modified.)

[2] Peter Kropotkin, *'The Conquest of Bread' and Other Writings*, ed. Marshall S. Schatz. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995 [1892]); David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*. (New York: Melville House, 2011).

[3] Beatriz Preciado, *Testo Junky: Sex, Drugs and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, trans Bruce Benderson. (New York: The Feminist Press, 2013), p. 40.

[4] Bernard Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth and Generations*, trans. Stephen Barker. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), pp. 12-3, 196n.34.

[5] Gilles Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', *October*, vol. 59, p. 4.